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ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify factors that lead to successful educational partnerships between school staff and families. Parents of students in a Boston, Massachusetts K-5 school were interviewed about how and why they were involved in their children's education and what they believed were the factors that influenced their participation. Given that the "hard to reach" label is often bestowed on parents from urban, lower socioeconomic communities, the study was conducted at an urban school with a reputation of having a strong family partnership initiative and with parents who qualified for free or reduced priced lunch for their children. The stories told by the 18 parents interviewed strongly support the research stating that the majority of parents, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status are intensely interested in their children's education. Parents understood clearly that their involvement helped their children's educational development. Parents were involved in their children's education in ways not recognized by school staff with a narrow vision of what constitutes legitimate participation, capturing a wide range of activities taking place both at home and at school. Social factors emanating from the parents' own experiences and history influence their participation. A most important finding was that school factors, specifically those that are relational in nature, have a major impact on parents' involvement. When school staff engage in caring and trustful relationships with parents that recognize parents as partners, parents are more willing to be involved. Parents described a process whereby such relationships are formed: the school community welcomes parents into the school, honors their participation, and connects with parents through a focus on the children and their learning. The findings pose implications for practice, dispelling the myth that parents of different ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds do not care, and suggesting that school personnel recognize various forms of family involvement and understand the school's role in cultivating family engagement. (Contains 40 references.) (HTH)

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Having Their Say: Parents Describe How and Why They are Involved in Their Children's Education

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
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New Orleans, LA
April, 2002

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, there has been a renewed national focus on the role that families play in their children's educational development. More than three decades of research show that, regardless of economic, racial/ethnic and educational backgrounds, there is a strong link between educational benefits to children and various forms of family engagement such as encouragement to succeed academically, involvement in at-home activities such as help with homework, volunteerism in schools, and participation in governance activities (Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Eagle, 1989; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, Simon & Salinas, 1997; Gotts, 1989; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Hewitt, 1978; Jordan, Orozco & Averett, 2002; McDill, Rigsby, & Meyers, 1969; Melnick & Fiene, 1990; Mowry, 1972; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1992). The educational benefits to children include higher grades and test scores, better school attendance, higher graduation rates, greater enrollment in postsecondary education, and more positive attitudes about school (Henderson & Berla, 1994). As a result of this link between family engagement and student outcomes, several of the current whole-school comprehensive reform efforts identify school, family, and community partnership as a component of successful schools. For example, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (Obey-Porter Act of 1998) identifies "parent and community involvement" as one of its eight design requirements for strategies used by schools committed to achieving high standards for all students.

Despite this emphasis on partnership between schools and families, teachers, principals and parents attempting to coordinate family involvement initiatives express frustration at low levels of success in creating programs that forge meaningful and lasting connections with families. In some cases, the failure of these programs to take hold is attributed to low levels of involvement on the part of families. This claim of minimal family involvement is particularly heard in school systems serving low-income and minority families (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Comer, 1980; Davies, 2001; Lightfoot, 1978; Lareau, 1987, Lopez, 2001).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Given the new focus on the role of families in their children's educational development, the purpose of this study was to identify factors that lead to successful educational partnerships

between school staff and families. The method for this investigation focused on asking parents[1] how and why they were involved in their children's education and what were the factors that influenced their participation. The study was conducted at the Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School, in Boston, MA, where, according to yearly survey data collected by the school, at least 90% of the parents participated in one or more of the home- or school-based family engagement activities. This urban, full inclusion K-5 school served a student body of 220 students in which approximately 67% of the students, based on family income, qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. The school population was racially diverse. Fifty-five percent of the students were African American, 34% were white, 6% were Hispanic and 5% were Asian. Twenty five percent of the 220 students were categorized as special needs children. Between 1989 and 1995, the O'Hearn School's average median percentile scores on the Massachusetts Achievement Test for students in grades one through five rose eighteen percentage points in English (from 44 to 62) and thirty one points in math (from 48 to 79).

The O'Hearn School, with the majority of its school population being eligible for free or reduced lunch, its 90% rate of family involvement, and improvement in student achievement offered a rich setting in which to ask low-income parents about why and how they were involved in their children's education and to explore factors influencing their participation.

Given that the "hard to reach" label is often bestowed on parents from urban, lower socioeconomic communities, the study was conducted at an urban school with a reputation of having a strong family partnership initiative and with parents who qualified for free or reduced priced lunch. The goal of this research study was to develop a deeper understanding of these parents' perceptions about their involvement in their children's education. The lack of involvement on the part of low-income parents is often attributed to their "lack of time, interest, or competence to be involved, and that some do not value education" (Davies, 1988, p. 53). By gathering parents' *own* descriptions of their participation in their children's education, the study explored if parents' descriptions would match existing typologies such as Epstein's (1988, 1991, 1994) six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and involvement with the community— or fall outside existing definitions,

[1] In this study, the term "parent" refers to any adult caretaker.

requiring a more expanded and/or culturally inclusive definition of family involvement (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1994).

Another goal of the research was to investigate factors that influenced parents' involvement in their children's education in an attempt to understand the motivations, incentives, expectations, and apprehensions influencing parents' participation in their children's educational development and/or in family involvement programs (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

This paper will provide a description of the family involvement initiative at the Patrick O'Hearn School, a summary of the research methodology, and a presentation of the major findings followed by implications of the findings for both practice and research.

THE O'HEARN SCHOOL AND THE EVOLUTION OF ITS FAMILY INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

Early in 1989, the Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School was selected as the first school in Boston to house a K-5 full inclusion program. In the summer of 1989, William Henderson was appointed the new principal of the O'Hearn Elementary School (hereafter referred to as the O'Hearn).

At the beginning of the school year, Henderson surveyed the teaching staff to identify issues to be addressed as top priorities for the school. The results of the survey overwhelmingly identified the need for an increase in family involvement. Henderson asked the teachers to identify a group of parents from a wide spectrum of backgrounds and experiences as possible leaders. The O'Hearn teachers identified a group of approximately ten parents, and these parents formed an O'Hearn family involvement committee. The committee was racially and socioeconomically diverse, and also represented differences in family composition: single parents, grandparents, and parents of children with and without special needs were members. The committee began to meet regularly to strategize how to reach out to families to encourage their involvement.

Parents' Participation in School Governance

In addition to the formation of the family involvement committee, with the support of Henderson, parents began active engagement in the governance of the school. In 1990, a policy went into effect in the district that allowed Boston schools to voluntarily adopt school site

councils as a governance structure.[2] Henderson, following through on the staff's request for more family involvement at the school, encouraged staff and members of the parent involvement committee to form a school site council. The teachers and parents agreed, and in 1990, the O'Hearn was one of approximately thirty-five schools out of 117 to voluntarily adopt the school site council system of governance. A racially mixed group of seven parents and seven teachers, along with Henderson, began to meet each month to concentrate on issues of teaching and learning at the school.

The Formation of the Family Outreach Program

In the fall of 1991, the O'Hearn received a grant from the Institute for Responsive Education to assist the school's efforts to enhance programs of partnership between themselves, families, and communities. The grant called for the school to form a team consisting of parents, teachers, and the principal, charged with the task of expanding and strengthening the O'Hearn family involvement program. As a result of the funding, the O'Hearn "Family Outreach Team" was formed, consisting of new parents recruited to join the team, members from the previous family involvement committee, a teacher who volunteered to serve on the committee, and Henderson (Palanki & Burch, 1995). The group continued to be diverse, with approximately fifteen volunteer parents and grandparents of African American, White, and Latino backgrounds, and a mixture of parents with regular and special needs children. The grant also provided for a facilitator to work with the group one day a week.

The new O'Hearn Outreach Team was particularly interested in developing relationships with parents who rarely, if ever, made contact with the school. The Outreach Team decided that face-to-face, parent-to-parent contact was a way to begin the building of relationships between families and the school. The team developed a home visitation program to families as an outreach strategy. Home visits were not designed to lecture parents on how they should be involved in their children's education, but to deliver the message that families were respected and welcomed into the O'Hearn community.

As a result of the home visitation program, families who had never come to the O'Hearn began coming to the school for the first time (Palanki, et al, 1995). In the summer of 1992, the

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[2]In 1990, the Boston School district adopted a voluntary policy of school site councils as a governance structure for the schools. The district switched to a mandatory policy of school site councils for all schools in the district in 1993.

Outreach group met and decided on a new policy for home visits. To develop positive relationships right from the start with families new to the school, the team decided to make home visits to new families to the school at the beginning of each school year. Beginning in the fall of 1992, families of every new child attending the school received a visit from an outreach member.

The Opening of the Family Center

Working in collaboration with Henderson and teachers, the parent committee raised funds and organized the opening of a family center in the school library. In the spring of 1991, the "O'Hearn Family Center" was opened as a place for families to come and feel welcome in the school, creating a comfortable setting for families to gather for refreshments and informal conversation on various social and educational topics. The Center was equipped with furniture, a refrigerator, and supplies for coffee and refreshments. As time went on, the Center was used regularly by both the parent group and teachers for events such as special breakfasts, parent/teacher conferences, and welcoming activities for families at the school.

Additional Components of the Family Involvement Program

The Outreach team members continued to reflect on their work, meeting once a month to share their experiences. One outcome of their meetings was the team's establishment of a community resource area in the Family Center for information on social service agencies and organizations in and around Boston that provided assistance to families. Several other family involvement projects branched off from the work of the Outreach Team, such as the publication of a school newsletter and the creation of an "O'Hearn Family Leadership Team." The Leadership Team was designed to bring together the coordinators of the various projects of the Outreach program, such as the newsletter, the family center, and the home visitation program. Teachers were also members of the Leadership Team, and the group met monthly to continue to work on developing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all O'Hearn families.

Outreach Team members held additional workshops to improve on their own skills as outreach volunteers. Working collaboratively with the O'Hearn staff, they developed new strategies to encourage and welcome families to the school and to offer educational information and assistance to families.

The councils consisted of the principal and an equal number of teachers and parents. The councils were to reflect the racial balance of the population of the school they represented.

Teachers and parents stated that the involvement of parents early on in the establishment of the inclusion program at the O'Hearn helped create a culture at the school that was open to and accepting of *all* levels of family participation. This culture supported a climate where all families were encouraged and expected to be active members of the school community.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The O'Hearn was chosen as the site for the study based on two important criteria. First, the school selected had to have an active family engagement program, with at least 40 to 50 percent of the families being involved in some aspect, either at home or at school, in their children's education. Such a documented rate of participation would offer a pool of families engaged in a range of activities. Second, the school site had to have a population that was diverse racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically.

The research methodology chosen for this study was a qualitative, case study design. This case study strategy made it possible to explore, in an in-depth and intimate fashion, why and how parents from the O'Hearn were engaged in their children's education.

The centerpiece of the data collection strategy took the form of one-on-one, in-depth interviews conducted in 1996-98 with eighteen O'Hearn parents whose children, based on family income level, qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Eighteen parents were interviewed for the study: sixteen women and two men. The group included nine African Americans, eight Whites, and one Hispanic American. Family composition was diverse and included two couples (wife and husband), five married mothers, and nine single mothers (three were divorcees). Five of the families had children with special needs enrolled at the school.

All of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the families. The average duration of each interview was two to three hours. Interviews were also conducted with seven members of the O'Hearn School staff: the principal, the secretary, the custodian and four teachers to gain important contextual information about the school's culture and history. Observations were done at activities such as special events held for parents, school plays, and various school committee meetings.

MAJOR FINDINGS

In answer to the first research question, *"Why and how are low-income parents involved in their children's education?,"* three themes emerged from the stories told by O'Hearn parents:

1. The stories told by the eighteen parents interviewed for this study strongly support the research stating that the majority of parents, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, are intensely interested in their children's education (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 1995; Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbush, 1993; Rich, 1988). Parents expressed a genuine and deep-seated desire to help their children succeed in school. Parents wanted their children to succeed academically and were motivated to do what they could to ensure their children's academic success. The notion that lower income parents "don't care" about their children's education was challenged by the stories told by the O'Hearn parents about their desire to do what they could to help their children succeed academically.

2. Parents understood clearly that their involvement helped their children's educational development. Parents described seeing differences in their children' behavior and feelings about school as a result of their at-home and/or at-school involvement. Their children's reactions to their involvement served as a motivating factor for parents' continued support.

3. Parents were involved in their children's education in ways not recognized by school staff with a narrow vision of what constitutes legitimate participation. The involvement of parents captured a wide range of activities taking place both at home and at school. In addition to more traditional forms of involvement, parents provided verbal support and encouragement, cultivated strong educational values, provided incentives for their children to work hard and to do well in school, gave indirect as well as direct support to their children with homework, set up environments at home conducive to performing school work, and encouraged and supported their children's involvement in outside organizations such as the Boy's Club or church programs. Parents' own cultural traditions and values often shaped forms of involvement. For example, one parent from the Dominican Republic explained that she told her children repeatedly, as her mother had told her, "school was sacred, like church." Many

of the parents also encouraged and supported their children's involvement in outside youth organizations and church programs.

In answer to the second research question, *"What are the factors that influence involvement?,"* two additional themes emerged. Parents stated that "social" and "school" factors influence their involvement:

4. Social factors emanating from the parents' own experiences and history influence their participation. These factors include parents' own educational experiences in school, their own parents' involvement when they were students, their beliefs about family involvement as shaped by cultural norms and values, and the burden of their additional responsibilities and time commitments.

5. An important finding of this study was that school factors, specifically those that are relational in nature, have a major impact on parents' involvement. When school staff engage in caring and trustful relationships with parents that recognize parent as partners in the educational development of children, these relationships enhance parents' desire to be involved and influence how they participate in their children's educational development. Parents described a process by which these relationships were formed. This process has been operationalized by the O'Hearn whereby the school community welcomes parents into the school, honors their participation, and connects with parents through a focus on the children and their learning.

Borrowing a concept from family systems literature, this "joining process" (Minuchin, 1981) of welcoming, honoring, and connecting with families creates a school community in which they feel like "members of a family." Parents respond to this culture by participating in their children's education in ways that they themselves had never foreseen and by becoming loyal members of the school community. The following section describes the joining process and outlines the impact of the process on parents' engagement in their children's education.

The Three Components of the Joining Process

Welcoming

Parents reported that the process of welcoming created a sense of belonging, one in which parents felt that they belonged to the school and that the school also belonged to them. This sense of belonging motivated parents to be more active in their children's schooling. Parents described several practices that illustrated how the welcoming of families was achieved and its impact on their involvement. For example, parents stated that the O'Hearn community—the principal, teachers, other staff members and parents—communicated with them in ways that welcomed them and demonstrated a sincere desire to include parents in the life of the school.

> When your child first starts the school, they have other parents call you up and welcome you to the school. That's really nice. Then they have a new parent breakfast, which they have every year. I managed to drag myself there with my screaming child. He was really good there, and I met many of the parents that I see all the time now, and everybody was very friendly. That started the interest for me, to see how involved everyone was. I felt like it was a "welcoming-into-the-school" kind of thing, and that made me feel like, "Look at all these people, doing all this for the parents." So I try to do whatever I can whenever they have parties, make food or something. I do something to help out. That [event] brought me out to go ahead and do what I could for the school, too. *O'Hearn parent*

> If [the school] is not a friendly place, you would have to push yourself into being involved. The O'Hearn has given me the opportunity to be involved. By being a friendly place, it's been easy for me to do it. I'm not fighting for permission. Everything is there for me to know. *O'Hearn parent*

Some parents commented that the actual physical environment of the school contributed to their feeling welcomed when entering the school building. The colorful walls, decorated with numerous examples of children's artwork, and the cleanliness of the school all added to the feeling of welcome.

The statements of the parents in this study about the welcoming process draw attention to an important and often overlooked aspect of developing school/family relationships. School staff often overlook the barriers that exist between families and school because of differences in culture, race, and socioeconomic status, or because parents are intimidated by or fearful of school personnel. Staff do not consider that their school environment and culture may be unwelcoming and uninviting to families. Therefore, no attention is paid to developing purposeful and systematic initiatives that welcome families into the school community. The parents make clear the value of the welcoming process on the building of positive relationships

between families and school staff and its influence on why and how they are involved in the school community.

Honoring

Parents described this second component of joining as one in which members of the O'Hearn community "honor" families by respecting and recognizing their strengths and validating and affirming parents' efforts to be involved in their children's education. Parents described how they felt honored by members of the O'Hearn community when any effort they made to be involved was validated and when they were treated by school staff as true partners in the educational development of their children. Parents also stated that they were encouraged and supported by the principal and other members of the school staff to work on various decision making committees and projects and, in doing so, they were often paired with more experienced parent volunteers. This encouragement and support influenced parents' involvement, in some cases, motivating them to become involved in ways that they ordinarily would not.

Parents stated that school staff asked for and gave information about the children's learning in a respectful and caring manner, and that their comments about their children were always listened to and heard by teachers. Many parents said that they felt respected and validated when their ideas and concerns were heard and taken seriously. Even if teachers and parents disagreed over an issue, most parents felt that teachers were always willing to listen and took parents' feedback seriously. Parents stated that relationships with staff were reciprocal where ideas and feedback were shared in a way that parents' contributions were given equal weight and importance. Parents spoke about the school staff's practice of honoring and respecting the voices of parents:

> I chose the O'Hearn School because it was clearly the only public school available to me where parents got any respect and counted, and where teachers and parents and kids really worked together in a genuine way. *O'Hearn parent*

> The O'Hearn School asks for [parents'] participation and advice all of the time. It seems like the school lets the parents make the decisions and that makes the parents become more involved. [Parents] feel like they're really a part of it. At the meetings, it's just like a family. Issues [are] being discussed, parents talk about what we feel is best for our child or for the school as a whole. Then [we] vote on it. If you have any suggestions, they're always open to that. *O'Hearn parent*

The honoring component of the joining process focuses on recognizing parents as equal partners in the educational development of their children. Parents reported being more likely to continue or even enhance their involvement in their children's schooling when their efforts were respected and validated by the school community.

Connecting

O'Hearn school staff and families put children at the center and connect on education issues of common interest designed to improve learning opportunities for the children. Parents reported feeling connected to the school community through the school's emphasis on improved teaching and learning for all children. All of the family involvement activities, from school plays to open houses had, as their focus, improved educational achievement for all the children.

Parents stated that the O'Hearn School staff cared for and had high expectations for the children. This show of caring on the part of O'Hearn staff for not only the educational but overall welfare of the children connected the parents and school staff.

> They made me feel like they were there to teach my son. They were always giving me little insights that they saw about him. I knew they were paying attention to my son, that they knew my son. That made me feel good. They knew what his strengths and his weaknesses were. They were telling me things about him that I would have told them, which was so cool. Before the words were coming out of my mouth, they were telling me about his strengths and weaknesses and what should and shouldn't be done. I said to myself, "They know my son." *O'Hearn parent*

> I have three children at the O'Hearn School. The closeness the teachers seem to have with my children makes me want to be more involved in their lives. The teachers seem more concerned, more involved in the children's education. That makes you want to be more involved in your child's life, when it comes down to school. *O'Hearn parent*

The connecting component, which places the children's education at the center, brings together parents and school staff. Parents and staff rally around a goal that is meaningful and important to both. Parents become loyal advocates of the school when school staff demonstrate that they care about and are committed to educating their children. Parents and teachers build a relationship of trust and understanding as they work together as *equal* partners on educating the children. The focus on the children is what keeps parents connected, involved, and feeling like important members of the school community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Dispelling the Myth that Parents do not Care

The O'Hearn parents' stories suggest that school personnel should not assume that parents from different ethnic backgrounds and/or socioeconomic groups 1) care less or have dismissive attitudes about their children's education, or 2) have little understanding of the importance of their involvement on their children's education. Schools adopting the attitude that parents "don't care" about their children's education may be hard pressed to create environments conducive to cultivating effective partnerships between parents and schools.

Recognizing Various Forms of Family Involvement

One of the findings from the study suggests that parents may be involved in their children's education in ways not recognized by schools with a narrow vision of what constitutes legitimate participation. Schools that only recognize school directed and sanctioned activities such as fundraising, volunteering in classrooms, or participating on school leadership teams as legitimate forms of involvement may limit the ways that parents can be involved and overlook ways that families with diverse backgrounds and cultures are involved in their children's education. By not recognizing diverse forms of involvement and providing different outlets for family participation, schools may unwittingly restrict the ways that parents can be involved in their children's schooling. The study findings suggest that the lack of options for, rather than a lack of interest in involvement, may limit parents' participation.

Understanding the School's Role in Cultivating Family Engagement

One if the most important findings to emerge from the O'Hearn parents' stories is how much of a role school factors play in influencing parents' involvement. The process of joining with families creates an environment where many of the parents' past negative school experiences and/or feelings of alienation are diminished. Validation of any contribution made by the parents helped them to feel like important contributors to the school community, increasing their efficacy—their sense of confidence—in being able to help their child (Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 1995, 1997). Connecting with parents by focusing on the children and their learning environment brought the eighteen parents together with school staff over common goals and objectives.

These findings suggest that all three components of the joining process—welcoming, honoring, and connecting—encourage active at-home or at-school involvement and foster

relationships of partnership between parents and school staff. The ultimate impact of the joining process is the strengthening of parents' capacity to help their children, thereby strengthening the school's overall educational capacity. Parents become connected to a caring educational community in a manner that is empowering.

Even in caring school communities, conflicts and tensions arise between parents and school staff. Some parents reported not always agreeing with Principal Henderson's style of participatory management and described having arguments and disagreements with him. Other parents reported being angry at school staff. However, the foundation of trust established between families and staff created a community where conflicts happened but were often resolved, supporting Epstein's (1995) assertion that schools that create caring communities by entering into relationships of partnership with families withstand conflicts.

> In a caring school community, participants work continually to improve the nature and effects of partnerships. Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth or successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build. Good partnerships withstand questions, conflicts, debates, and disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained—even strengthened—after differences have been resolved. Without this firm base, disagreements and problems that are sure to arise about schools and students will be harder to solve. (1995, p. 703)

This study suggests that parents' involvement in their children's education is influenced by a school culture that values and works aggressively to form relationships with families that are respectful and reciprocal. The language used by the eighteen parents interviewed for this study emphasizes relationship and trust factors as important influences on their involvement. Many school programs, however, place emphasis on the programming portion of their family involvement initiative and not the process of building relationships between families and school staff. At the O'Hearn, the commitment to building relationships between parents and school staff goes beyond surface and superficial attempts at school/family collaborations. When O'Hearn parents and staff speak of being a part of the school family, this connection is deeply personal.

These findings also suggest that the commitment, support and active involvement of the principal are required to create and sustain a school culture that embraces full participation on the part of families. According to staff and parents interviewed for the study, one of the most pronounced influences on the family involvement initiative at the O'Hearn was the example set

by the principal. When he arrived as the new principal, William Henderson embraced a high level of family involvement and demonstrated his commitment through his own actions. He also stressed the importance of family involvement to his school staff. This resulted in a school community in which its members were "on the same page" about parents' involvement in their children's schooling.

Too often schools pay lip service to the importance of family involvement and make half-hearted attempts to involve families. Some schools hire a lone parent or family coordinator to organize the entire family involvement initiative. Programs of this nature often disintegrate without the support and involvement of the leadership and school staff. Often, the failure of the program is attributed to families' lack of interest. Data from this study suggests that the support of the school leadership and staff is the crucial ingredient for the success of family involvement initiatives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As children move through middle and high school, family involvement in their schooling diminishes (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Given that this study was conducted in an elementary school, further research is needed to explore whether factors that the eighteen O'Hearn families said influence why and how they are involved apply to the experiences of middle and high school parents as well. Do the same social and school factors influence the involvement of these parents? In-depth studies conducted at middle and high school sites are needed to shed light on whether similar or different factors influence parents' involvement.

This study identified the support and involvement of the principal as key in creating a school environment and culture that supports family involvement. What kind of school leadership fosters the development of a caring school community? What are the skills needed on the part of the principal to create effective partnerships between schools and families? More research is needed to study the knowledge and skill base of those principals who lead schools with cultures that embrace family involvement.

In addition to identifying the skills required of the principal, what do teachers need to know and be able to do to foster partnerships with families? This information is needed to create teacher and administrator pre- and in-service programs that develop the competencies necessary to cultivate partnerships with families.

This study did not focus on the types of relationships existing among members of the O'Hearn teaching staff. However, it is interesting to note that a culture of partnership and collaboration among the teaching staff exists at the O'Hearn. Classes are team taught with two teachers working in close collaboration with each other. Krasnow (1990) suggests

> The ecology of the school has a profound effect on the sense of control, empowerment, and motivation of teachers. Creating schools that are positive learning environments for children may have to start with the creation of positive work environments for teachers. (p. 31)

Does, therefore, the culture of collaboration between the O'Hearn teachers influence the dynamic of partnership with families? Can schools with no history or culture of collaboration and partnership between staff members engage in effective partnerships among families? One would intuit that the answer is "no." This raises yet another important and interesting question for further investigation.

CONCLUSION

The eighteen O'Hearn parents interviewed for this study want their children to succeed in school and understand the importance of family participation in their children's education. In addition, the parents report that social and school factors influence their involvement. These parents also reveal that their involvement is significantly influenced by a school environment that "feels like family."

The limits of this study—its focus on parents from one school site and the sample size of eighteen parents and seven school staff—make it impossible to generalize the findings beyond the research setting. However, these findings provide greater insight into family participation in urban schools. The study suggests that school staff must support a culture of family at their sites where all members of the school community are respected and honored. The findings indicate that respectful relationships where power is shared between school staff and family members provide the glue that holds the community together and influences parents' involvement. Debby Meier (1998) states

> Until the relationships between all the people—parents and teachers—responsible for raising our children are changed, changing the parts (curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment) won't matter very much...Creating forms of governance and accountability that are mindful first and foremost of their impact on effective relationships between teachers, children, and families will not be an easy task. It may not even show up as a blip on next year's test scores. But shortcuts that bypass such relationships are inefficient. (p. 362)

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